

MORAL TEACHING OF WORLD'S GREAT RELIGIONS IS THEME

[Paper read by Mrs. L. C. Howland before Women's Board of Missions, Tuesday, Dec. 3, 1912.]

It has never been given to any religion to make the acts and deeds of its followers the test of their belief. Every human being fails more or less, mostly more, and yet he may have declared his belief in his chosen faith and a desire to keep its precepts. There are proscribed rules in every religion and those who, by their submission to these rules, show their regard for the faith and their aspiration to follow its truth so far as in them lies, shall be called the followers of that faith.

An outsider is apt to judge a religion as he judges other things, by acts; his only means of appraising its value is by what he sees done by its followers. The Christian religion would hardly stand a test like this. A person coming among us to learn of our faith would be greatly puzzled at the differences between the commands of the Christian religion and the life of its followers. In our Bible he would read the precepts: "Do not steal, give to every man that asketh of you, riches are an offence to righteousness." Observe our daily lives he would find a great and continuous struggle for wealth and each man trying to get the best of his fellow-men.

There are two ways in which to look at a religion—from the outside and from the inside. The outside sees merely the acts; he knows the tree by its fruit, but to the believer, his religion is the one great and pure religion. So we must be very cautious in our judgments of other faiths and we must see them from both the outside and the inside before we draw our conclusions.

What do we mean by the moral teachings of a religion? Christianity regards morals as the science of duty; right is duty which has been fulfilled, and wrong is duty-unfulfilled. If we use this definition of morals, then by the moral teachings of a religion we mean the precepts of that religion which prescribe the duties of its followers, what things they may do rightly and what things are wrong.

When we think of certain acts as being right or wrong we approve or disapprove of these acts. If a duty has been fulfilled, the act is right and calls for approval; if the duty has not been fulfilled the act is wrong and brings disapproval. These two emotions, approval and indignation, are called the moral emotions and one of them is the natural consequence of every act which has any moral aspect.

The first of these, approval, is shown in the customs of a group of men, for a custom is not merely a habit of a group of people, but almost always involves a moral rule. If a community is truthful it is because the people approve of truth, and where lying is prevalent, truthfulness cannot be a sacred duty. The study of morals, then, must be largely a study of customs.

The other moral emotion, indignation, is shown in the punishments inflicted by a group of men. The acts which are punished in a community are those which are publicly resented. So also, by the punishments of a people, we may learn much of their moral ideals.

A knowledge of the customs and punishments of a people gives us a view of their moral standards from the outside and we may gain an inside view of their religion by a study of their sacred books.

Westermarck in his "Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas" divides modes of conduct into six groups:

1. Acts which concern other men.
2. Acts which concern one's self.
3. Sexual relations.
4. Acts towards the lower animals.
5. Conduct toward the dead.
6. Ideas of God.

The last of these we shall take up first and then we shall follow the others in their regular order.

Duties to Gods—In every religion we can distinguish two elements, a belief and a regardful attitude toward the object of belief. Men usually regard it as a sacred duty not only to refrain from injuring their gods, but also to positively promote their welfare and comfort. Supernatural beings are, in some religions, thought to be subject to human needs.

Hinduism, or Brahmanism, is a pure spiritualism. God is an idealized intelligence. He is the only real being in the universe and finite things are only aspects of this one central intelligence. Sin is imaginary, merely an appearance of this life for which man is not responsible.

The idols, commonly worshipped by the Hindus, are thought to be representations of the one god, merely instruments by which the mind may be raised to true worship. But at least the common people really believe in these innumerable gods and goddesses and the idols are in themselves made the objects of worship. One may well say that India has gone mad in her passion for populating the world with gods; there are images everywhere, all of them are hideous and many are peculiarly revolting—intensified by the fact that they are each day bathed in oil and so attract all the dust, dirt and grime in their vicinity.

The Vedic gods are often of bad character and are guilty of the worst crimes; lying, adultery and murder are not thought to be sinful in the gods. They wear clothes, are drunkards and suffer from constant hunger. Should sacrifices cease for an instant they would stop sending rain and other necessities to man.

Men are induced by various motives to offer sacrifices; fear is a large element in Hinduism as in many religions, but hope also has its place. The idea of give and take, in other words, you give me this, I will give you that, is a large element in Hinduism.

greatly influences the Hindu's belief in sacrifice. In the belief of their followers, the gods of most religions are sensitive to disrespect and demand submissiveness and homage. Those who are guilty of disrespect to the gods are often punished by men also. A Mohammedan who is guilty of blasphemy is immediately put to death. The gods of Brahmanism have mystic names which no one dares to speak; the real name of Confucius is so sacred that it is a statutory offence in China to pronounce it. Among Christians there is a common distinction to use the word "God" or its equivalent in everyday speech.

One of the greatest insults which can be offered to a god is to deny his existence. Some gods are extremely ungenerous towards all who do not recognize them and only them as their objects of worship. Intolerance is a characteristic of all monotheistic religions, while polytheism is by nature tolerant (gods who are used to sharing their favor cannot be very jealous gods). One great difficulty in persuading the Chinese to accept Christianity is said by a missionary to be due to their notion that one religion is as good as another.

Prayer is also a tribute to all self-regarding gods, some of whom love flattery. The Mohammedan invokes Allah with such phrases as: "God is great, God is merciful, God is he who seeth and heareth." The following story is told of some Chinese: At the hottest season of the year the people, as a snowstorm in Szechuan. In conservation, went to the temple of the great prince to pray. The spirit moved one of the company to say: "You now address me as your honor, make it your excellency and though I am but a lesser deity it may well be worth your while to do so." Thereupon the people began to address the god in flattering terms and the snow stopped at once. The Hindus believe that by praise a person may obtain from the gods whatever he wishes, and a single invocation of the divine name may cancel a whole life of sin.

Buddhism is rather a system of conduct than a religion. If the genuine Buddhist worships any higher power, it is the moral order which never fails to assert itself in the law of cause and effect. Man is entirely dependent upon his own resources in winning his salvation; every thought and action entails its just reward and leaves him nearer to or farther from his goal.

Confucius, as well as Buddha neither asserts nor denies the existence of a supreme god and he makes morality infinitely more important than religion. Confucianism holds that all men are naturally good and that the example of wise fathers is all that is necessary to keep them so. Prayer is useless and rewards and punishments are only natural results of conduct.

The god of Mohammedanism demands a righteous life; he punishes the evil and rewards the good. The foremost duty of men is to believe in Allah, a god of force, in whose hands his children are mere tools. Mohammedanism is a ritualistic religion requiring the performance of certain definite ceremonies, the reciting of the creed, stated prayers, fasting, giving of alms and a pilgrimage to Mecca. Men are absolutely predestined to lives of good or evil but at the same time they are punished for their wrong deeds by an intolerant and unyielding god.

Conduct Towards Other Men.

It is commonly maintained that the most sacred duty which we owe to our fellowmen is respect for their lives. Homicide is generally prohibited within the tribe and in more advanced culture the circle of prohibition includes the nation. How little regard is felt for the lives of strangers appears in the readiness with which war is waged against foreign nations, combined with the esteem in which the successful warrior is held by his countrymen.

To kill a Brahman is an unpardonable sin among the Hindus, but the lives of men of lower caste are not held in such high esteem. The Vedic hymns are full of prayers of misfortune upon men of another race.

The shedding of human blood is commonly prohibited in certain places, and in India there are certain peaceable towns in which this has never been shed.

Mohammedanism protects its own followers from homicide, but is even hostile towards those who are not believers, and the infidel not the foreigner, as such, is the proper object of slaughter.

In Buddhism and Confucianism the circle, within which homicide is prohibited, comes to include all mankind. The Buddhist is enjoined to abstain from even defensive warfare and the followers of Confucius must use weapons only when compelled by most dire necessity.

Christianity introduced a high regard for human life, but the command "Thou shalt not kill" was not steadfastly followed by the Christian church, which was engaged during one period of its history, in a series of bloody wars. During late years, however, there has been a strong and increasing sentiment antagonistic towards all warfare.

The practice of infanticide is often dependent upon poverty; usually female infants are the ones killed because in all countries the life of a woman is held to be of less commercial importance than that of a man. In certain districts of India only one female child is allowed to live in one family and in the poorest districts of China female infants are often destroyed by their parents immediately after birth, chiefly because of poverty.

This practice is generally treated with indifference and many declare it to be necessary among the very poor.

Infanticide is prohibited by Buddhism and Mohammed said to his followers: "Slay not your children for fear of poverty, we will provide for them. Beware, for to slay them is a great sin." Yet the practice has been very common among the poor who suffer constantly from hunger and cold part of the year.

Christianity could add nothing to the horror of parricide. In China the killing of a father by his son is punished with the most ignominious of capital punishments; the cutting to pieces, and any person convicted of even a design to kill his parents is beheaded.

Confucianism teaches that filial piety is the very root of morality. Let me serve my father as I should require my son to serve me, and my elder brother as I should require by younger brother to serve me, is a motto of its followers. The great emphasis in Confucianism is laid on the parent and children have no rights; the father is supreme in his family and not even marriage with-draws the son from his power. The sale of children is practically allowed and a father may punish his disobedient child even to death without fear of interference.

The Hindu has three venerable superiors, his father, mother and spiritual teacher. To them he must always pay obedience. The father, however, is the head of the family only so long as he is the provider and the son must support his aged parents.

Islam also shows veneration for age and disobedience to a parent is equal to murder as a crime. The Buddhists treat the aged with great tenderness although they pretend to eliminate all personal affections, believing that he who is free from love is free also from grief.

The status of wives has to do with the ideas of the female sex in general. In China, woman is inferior to her husband, but her children must respect her as she respects him. The best girls are not considered of equal value to the worst boys. Women have no individual rights, but live and work for men. However the husband may not kill his wife and may not divorce her except for certain reasons.

The Hindu wife is enjoined to worship and obey her husband as a god and the woman who shows disrespect to him may be abandoned for three months and deprived of her ornaments. The Sacred Books say, "Let mutual fidelity continue until death," but the husband may divorce his wife at his pleasure. According to the Hindu law-giver, man, a wife who has committed a fault may be beaten with a rope of split bamboo, upon the back of the body, but never upon the head, which is a noble part.

"Women are of the snares which the tempter has spread for men, the most dangerous" was a saying of the Buddha yet among his followers women are better treated than by the adherents of other Oriental faiths. In Buddhist countries the wife and mother is indeed a queen in her own household and has great influence over her husband and her sons.

In Islam women are considered as being naturally depraved and the Prophet exhorted them thus, "O assembly of women, give alms, for verily ye are mostly of Hell on the day of resurrection." Mohammedanism has done much to lower the condition of women. This true that this religion does forbid the killing of female infants but only to allow them in later life to be committed to the evils of the harem.

Mohammedanism is primarily a religion for men and it is considered a crime to teach its most sacred truths to a woman. Women are advised to pray in private although the places of worship are not altogether closed to them.

The obligation of a mother to care for her child and that of a married man to provide for his family are laws belonging to all countries and to all times. The duties of charity and generosity towards those outside of one's own immediate kin, men are of varying importance among different sects although "Do good to others is a rule of all great teachers of morality."

The followers of Brahmanism are taught to seek the advancement of the welfare of others and among their charity is a virtue almost to a fault. Every family supports its own poor even to the relatives further removed. For this reason a poor law is unnecessary. Hospitality is an important duty which is thought to secure for a man, fame, long life and heavenly bliss.

Alms giving is one of the three cardinal virtues of Mohammedanism and self-denial is a special duty. Says the Korean "Prayer carries us half-way to God, fasting brings us to the gate of the palace and alms procures us admission."

Among the Buddhists praise is bestowed upon those who are kind to the poor and the monks are entirely supported by the gifts of the people. The generosity and charity of the Buddhists is, however, of an egotistical nature; they do what they do not so much with the idea of helping others as in the belief that the good will redound to the welfare of their own souls. Yet their kindness is very pleasing. The Malcom, a Baptist missionary, says that he was resting one day in a small village in Burma and was scarcely seated when an omnibus brought a man to him to lie on, and another brought cold water for him to drink and a man picked for him his oranges. None sought of expected the least reward, but each went his way and left him to repose.

To the Chinese benevolence is the root of all righteousness and the leading characteristic of perfect virtue. Kindness is more binding than love, is a saying of Confucius in which his followers, in their dealings with friends, today show their belief.

The universal condemnation of theft proves that the moral right of property exists among all races. According to the Korean the first offence of a thief shall be punished by the cutting off of the right hand. In the laws of Brahmanism the punishment increases with the rank of the offender, but to rob a Brahman is an unpardonable sin. One of the five commandments of the Buddha, binding upon all castes of people, is: "Do not steal." and to take from the monks is a very serious crime.

Concerning the duty of truthfulness Confucius said, "Let children always be taught to speak the simple truth." Truthfulness and sincerity are the first principles of morality according to his teachings, although he advises the father to shield the misconduct of his son and the son to protect the reputation of his father. He himself, however, did not always adhere strictly to the truth and would tell a lie for convenience. Twice he is said to have sent word to an unwelcome guest that he was ill when he wished to avoid an unpleasant interview.

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In the sacred books of the Hindus truth is highly celebrated. "If veracity and a thousand horse sacrifices be weighed against each other, truth is higher," says the Veda. According to its teachings, falsehood may be spoken only to save the life of a Brahman. However, the great mass of Hindus apparently have no notion of truth or falsehood and their motto seems to be to speak what is pleasing, whether or not it be truthful. A lie is not held by them to be disrespectful especially if it is not found out, and they think that a man is a fool who would believe another on a really important matter without an oath.

As in several religious systems of the east, the Hindus seek beyond the spreading of truth, the search for knowledge. Ignorance is considered a very great evil and the most important aim of life is to give and receive instruction. Among these people a man is venerated for his knowledge of the Veda rather than for his age.

Buddha enjoins his followers never to tell a conscious lie for any reason, but a lie to the Buddhist is quite a complicated affair, consisting of four steps: the utterance of the untruth, the knowledge of the untruth, the endeavor to prevent the learning of the truth and the discovery of the untruth by the person addressed.

A lie is reprobated by Mohammed with a few exceptions, but an untruth is excusable in order to reconcile people at variance to persuade one's wife or to obtain advantage in war against enemies of the faith. Knowledge of the truth is considered very important in Islam, for it is the light by which men find their way to heaven. Patriotism may be considered as a moral duty to our countrymen as a whole. Even where people show little of what we call "love of country," they do show more or less prejudice in favor of their own race.

The ancestor worship of the Chinese can hardly be called true patriotism. In Brahmanism the patriotic duty is narrowed down to caste, and in Islam the only public spirit is the common hatred of Christians.

Duties Which Concern a Man's Own Welfare.

The first of these duties is a man's responsibility concerning his own life.

The ideas in regard to suicide are influenced largely by beliefs about life after death. Among Confucianists suicide is very common among all ages and is usually applauded. Widows who end their lives at the funerals of their husbands are to be rewarded and the women who die for the sake of their chastity are entitled to honorary gates and a place among the objects of worship.

The gods of Hinduism find suicide acceptable among all except the Brahman caste. The last thought before death is considered very important by the Hindus and they end their own lives in order to have possession over this last thought. The emperor of Sati was so common in India, at one time that the government prohibited this rite, yet the spirit of Sati is said to dominate the hearts of Indian women to this day.

Buddhism forbids suicide except in rare circumstances. Among Mohammedans the practice is very rare. The taking of one's own life is thought to be a greater sin than murder, for it interferes with the decrees of God. This same fear of opposing God's plans leads to a suicidal contempt of life in the presence of disease or plague.

Sobriety, or even total abstinence is emphatically insisted upon by all eastern religions.

However, in Hinduism the real ideas of right and wrong are buried under a mass of customs of eating and drinking. There are thirteen kinds of intoxicating drinks mentioned in the sacred books and all are forbidden to Brahmins. Drunkenness is detested by all except the very lowest classes.

Of the five crimes of Buddhism, taking of life, theft, adultery, lying and drinking, the greatest is drinking, because it leads the way to all the others. Mohammed also forbids wine and other intoxicating drinks and ad-

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Sexual Relations.

There is usually an inner circle within which no marriage is allowed and also an outer circle beyond which marriage is not approved.

In the laws of Hinduism intermarriage between castes is prohibited. Sexual impurity in a man is no sin, but nothing is more abominable in a woman. Yet there are twelve thousand dancing girls in the temples of Brahmanism who are said to be married to the gods and who prostitute themselves to Brahmins and to visitors. Women may marry only once; each girl is bound in infancy to a boy baby; if he dies her stars have influenced his death and she is doomed to a miserable widowhood. There are twenty-six million widows in India, 400,000 of whom are under fifteen years of age.

The Hindus are indifferent concerning modesty. When a law was made years ago punishing obscenity, the government had to exempt religious writings from its rulings. The temple cars used for the conveyance of the gods are decorated with the most sensual pictures and carvings.

Islam prohibits marriage between a Mohammedan woman and a Christian man, but a Mohammedan may marry a Christian wife if induced by a very great love for her. Chastity is essential according to the teachings of the Prophet, but polygamy with servile concubinage, is the worm at the root of Islam. Divorce leads to consecutive polygamy, for most Moslems are too poor to have more than one wife at a time.

Confucianism virtually admits two standards of morality for men and women. Concubinage is legalized in order that sons may be secured to maintain the family line.

Treatment of Lower Animals.

According to Brahmanism, tenderness towards all creatures is a sacred duty. To kill a cow is a serious crime, and he who gives his life in defence of a cow atones for the murder of a Brahman.

In Buddhism, respect for all animal life is extreme. According to Mohammed, beasts are like men—tools in the hands of God—and will be gathered to their reward.

Regard for the Dead.

There is a general tendency in the human mind to regard what has existed as still existing. There are duties to the dead similar to those toward the living as well as special obligations concerning burial and mourning. But these we shall not take up in detail.

In the preparation of a paper of this character one must necessarily have recourse to authorities on such subjects. To the following credit is due for the principal ideas in this paper: Light of the World, Spear; Ten Great Religions; Westermarck's Origin and Development of Moral Ideas; Soul of a People, H. Fielding Hall; Ethics of Jesus; several books on Islam, China and India.

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